DATABASE MANAGEMENT

Just as e-mail and Web content must be managed according to a Records Retention and Disposition Schedule, information that is housed in databases must also be maintained. Once records in other formats are scanned and entered into a database, the originals may be legally destroyed as reference copies. The database record then becomes the official record copy, which must be retained according to the appropriate retention schedule.

Database Design

Databases must incorporate at least the following features if they are to be properly managed. First, databases must enable the user to take and store files off-line, such as in an inactive table. These inactive files must be retrievable throughout the full duration of their retention period. A technical document should accompany any inactive tables and should contain information about the database, including descriptions of each field, the relationships between data elements, and how the database is supposed to operate.

Second, databases must be able to identify records that have reached the end of their retention period. A database trigger is a stored procedure that is invoked automatically when a predefined event occurs, such as when a record arrives at the end of its retention period. This type of trigger in a date field, for example, should be included in the database to notify users when records are eligible for disposal.

Along with identification of records to be destroyed, a third essential functionality that databases should have is the ability to allow users to extract records from the database for the purpose of disposal. If records cannot be deleted from the database, they will be unnecessarily retained beyond their retention period. Deleted database records, like all records, must have their destruction documented. Keep in mind that electronic shredding for confidential records, however, is not an option in databases. Use the Certificate of Records Destruction (RM-3 Form) to report destruction of any records from a database.

Advantages and Limitations of Using Databases

Information stored in databases can be in either raw data form or uploaded as entire documents. Using databases for storage and retrieval has several advantages and limitations. Advantages include:

- Centralization of information
- Ease and speed of records dissemination and retrieval
- Multiple access points
- Increased security

The following are some of the challenges associated with database management:

- Cost of creating and implementing the database, including equipment, software, and expertise
- Possible cost of maintaining duplicate systems when the database has not fully replaced paper filing
- Preservation challenges

Database records pose many preservation challenges. First, many databases are proprietary. If the records in the database have a long-term retention period, they will eventually need to be extracted from the database structure and either reentered into a nonproprietary database, such as one created by an IT department, or transferred to an inactive table. Second, active databases are fluid by nature. Records are continually added or modified, and these changes may not be tracked. Database backups are often obsolete as soon as they are created, as information changes so quickly. For record-keeping purposes, only the most recent database copy is considered the record copy, but other copies are discoverable for legal battles and FOIA requests.